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From Cognitive to the Imaginal: Fostering Self-Understanding from and through Emotions in Adult Learning

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Abstract: Based on a critical review of the literature, this paper explores the imaginative contribution emotions make to self-understanding and how it complements the view of emotion as a form of cognition in adult learning.

Keywords: emotion in adult learning, self-understanding, transformative learning

Introduction

The study of emotions is characterized by widespread unevenness in how it has been theorized, conceptualized, and enacted in adult learning. Almost a half century ago, More (1974) drew attention to the importance of emotions. However, it would be another 20 years before the meaning of emotions in adult learning would become a prominent theme of research and scholarship in adult learning. Just 10 years ago, Turnbull (2004) characterized emotion as an “under-researched domain” within HRD. Even more recently, Plumb (2014) astutely observed that the literature in adult education provides “little comprehensive exploration of the nature of the emotions and their place in adult learning” (p. 145). Fostered in part by an expanding scholarship in transformative learning (Taylor & Cranton, 2012) over the last 25 – 30 years, many scholars and practitioners in adult education, human resource development, organizational learning, and other fields have emphasized the need to better understand the presence of emotions in the process of adult learning, and to more fully integrate them within curricular and instructional approaches to helping adults learn (Callahan & McCollum, 2002; Callahan, Hasler, & Tolson, 2005; Dirkx, 2008; Goleman, 1995, 1998; Hochschild, 1983; Nussbaum, 2003; Plumb, 2014; Turnbull, 2004; Vince, 2014).

Scholars have responded to this problem of self-understanding different ways. Scholars and practitioners working from a perspective of social justice charge that a focus on self-understanding reflects an individualistic perspective and psychologizes the purpose of the field. In an intriguing and innovative study of the intersection of self-directed learning and mindfulness, however, Nguyen (2017) argues for a concept he refers to as “personal justice.” He states that “people have talked too much about social justice but ignored “personal justice” (or what Foucault and Deleuze call ‘micropolitics’). He states, “Without personal justice, social justice is impossible. Social justice originates from the personal sense of justice” (p. 12). Applied to the current study, self-understanding mediates a kind of personal justice which, in turn, mediates a kind of social justice.

Another approach to the role of emotions in self-understanding reflects a largely instrumental or technical perspective and is often grounded in cognitive (Mackeracher, 2004) or skill-based (Nguyen, Miranda, Lapum, & Donald, 2016) approaches that emphasize emotional intelligence or emotion management (Goleman, 1995; 1998). In these approaches, self-understanding is viewed as an ability to be aware of one’s emotional states and to effectively adapt to the demands of the outer reality. These approaches largely ignore or minimize any constructive role for emotionality in fostering self-understanding.

Moving beyond these instrumental or technical perspectives requires a broader and more substantive understanding of the extra-rational role of emotions in adult learning. The present paper seeks to briefly address this need. We present a critical review and analysis of the literature on the role and understanding of emotions in adult learning. Based on this analysis, we argue that a fuller account of the meaning of emotion-laden experiences in adult learning requires us to go beyond the view of emotions as a form of intelligence or cognition, and to consider the creative and imaginative contribution they potentially make to self-understanding among adult educators and learners. We close by exploring the imaginal method, a process of imaginative engagement in which learners embrace and enter into dialogues with emotion-laden images and experiences, thereby fostering creative insights into the meaning of affect and emotion in their lives and cultivating greater self-understanding.

Understanding Emotions in Adult Learning

The reconstruction of the meaning of emotions in adult learning reflects three broad scholarly threads. Woven across adult learning, transformative learning, higher education, human resource development, and organizational development, these threads possess particular ways of understanding and responding to expressions of strong emotions as they relate to the learning process.

Managing Emotions

The first perspective we explore is the *managing* thread. Earlier views characterized emotions as “being irrational urges that buffet human beings and interfere with their capacity for thoughtful engagement with the vagaries of life” (Plumb, 2014, p. 146). Brookfield’s (2013) description of adult discussion groups as psychodynamic, emotional battlegrounds comes to mind. Jack Mezirow’s (1991) early theoretical work on perspective transformation largely ignored the affective or emotional contexts in which this process occurs. Mezirow (1991) privileged the rational-cognitive dimensions of TL to the exclusion of emotional engagement. Contemporary readings of Mezirow, however, provide an apologetic for this apparent oversight. Hoggan, Mälkki, and Finnegan (2017) and Mälkki (2010) contend that Mezirow frequently mentioned emotions in his work, even if he did not privilege them alongside the rational/cognitive domains of the self. However, Hoggan, Mälkki, and Finnegan (2017) suggest “criticisms of the cognitive emphasis of the theory are justifiable in the sense that the nature, role, and origins of emotions are not considered explicitly in the theory but remain rather in a subordinate role, whereas the elaboration on the cognitive aspects of learning are brought to the fore” (p. x).

The *Managing* school continues to be the most prominent theoretical construction in adult education and transformative learning. Chapman & Guerra (2016), speaking of the need to develop “emotional competence” in transformative learning, define the skill as the “ability to recognize and manage emotion, assimilate emotion in thought, and understand and reason with emotion” (p. 698). Cleveland-Innes and Campbell (2012), writing of adult learning in online contexts, suggest that “excessive emotion can harm our rational thinking, and a lack of emotion can make for similarly flawed thinking” (p. 273). This proposition deviates from the *Managing* school by assuming a dialogical relationship between the cognitive and the affective. However, Cleveland-Innes and Campbell (2012) go on to suggest that emotions present a “challenge for educators in determining how to best integrate and *control* emotions in a learning environment” (Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012, p. 273). The use of the word “control” indicates that the

ego dominates the subconscious, and that emotion must be subject to the “same kinds of critical scrutiny we might expect of other forms of reasoning” (Plumb, 2014, p. 157). Self-understanding is thus limited in this perspective due to its emphasis on keeping subconscious forces at bay and subject to the control of the ego.

Manipulating Emotions

The *manipulating* thread reflects the argument that effective pedagogy entails sincere engagement with emotionality, seeking to draw emotional expression out of students as a means of engage course content. Hagen & Park (2016) argue that educators should draw on "learning materials that will elicit emotion, draw on social connections or initiate existing schemas" (p. 183). In a piece for practitioners, Meacham (2014) encourages her audience to ask “what emotional response you are targeting for your learners? How do you want them to feel as they implement the new skill you are covering? Structuring the learning event to trigger this target emotion will ensure that it is coded in the Cerebral Cortex for future use.”

This stream is especially prevalent in the HRD/OD literature. In her 1983 book *The Managed Heart*, Hochschild coined the term *emotional labor* to describe how organizations implicitly or explicitly manipulate the emotions of their employees (Hochschild, 1983/2012). Hochschild discovered that employees engage in emotional labor through two primary ways: surface acting and deep acting. In *surface acting*, employees fake emotional responses that deviate from their true, internal feelings in order to meet the demands of their workplace. In *deep acting*, employees alter their inner emotions in order to achieve congruence with organizational demands. Researchers concluded that emotional labor is taxing on the well-being of employees, leading to immense stress, fatigue, and burnout (Grandey, 2000).

The implicit assumption in this perspective is that emotionality is something to be manipulated in order to satisfy the purposes proposed by an organization or a teacher. Self-understanding is thus interrupted by external forces seeking to control one’s subconscious expression and process of meaning-making.

Manifesting Emotions

The *manifesting* stream recognizes the expression of emotions as being in parallel with but not subservient to ego consciousness, rationality, and cognition (Dirkx, 2008, 2012, 2016). Rather than seeking to manage, control, or manipulate the expression and presence of emotions in adult learning, this school of thought recognizes and seeks to understand emotions and emotion-laden experiences and images as imaginative and creative expressions of the human psyche (Corbin, 2000). As such emotions are understood as giving voice to powerfully creative, imaginative, and relatively autonomous sense-making functions of the human psyche. That is, emotions and emotion-laden images represent fundamental ways in which we, through myth-making (Leonard & Willis, 2008), unconsciously make meaning of various aspects of our learning experiences. In contrast to the *managing* perspective, this school of thought approaches emotions in adult learning playfully and creatively, engaging emotions through what Jung referred to as the active imagination (Chodorow, 1997). In contrast to the *manipulating* perspective, this approach does not seek to maneuver emotions or control them, but rather to connect with and engage the free expression of the active imagination.

Dirkx has argued that emotions need to be a significant component of any learning process, arguing for an approach that “that reflects the intellectual, emotional moral, and spiritual dimensions of our being in the world” (Dirkx & Mezirow, 2006, p. 125). Imaginatively working

through our emotions in this manner contributes to a deepening understanding of ourselves as educators and learners. Among these are the relative autonomy of emotions from ego consciousness (Moore, 2002), the ways in which they are often expressed and experienced through particular images, and their capacity to illuminate and give voice to collective dimensions of human emotional experiences.

Self-Understanding through the Imaginal Method

The *manifesting* perspective lends itself well to the practice of a “mythopoetic” pedagogy (Corbin, 2000; Dirkx, 2012; Durand, 2000) or what we refer to as the *imaginal method*. While the *managing* and *manipulating* perspectives limit the role emotionality can play in both formal and informal education contexts, the *manifesting* perspective embraces emotionality, and seeks to create a space where emotionality can be expressed as a means of making sense. Dirkx (2012) puts forth the imaginal method as a means as a means of helping “students identify emotion-laden issues that often represent various manifestations of unconscious issues evoked in the context of teaching and learning” (p. 125). It is “through the process of observing and reflecting” that students “befriend powerful aspects of their inner lives and establish a relationship with unconscious psychic content” (Dirkx, 2012, p. 125). The *imaginal method*, provides a mythopoetic pedagogy that provides space for the expression of the imaginative and affective voices that populate the unconscious. In particular, the imaginal method provides a helpful framework for constructively and creatively working with emotion-laden experiences and images. Four components comprise the imaginal method: description, association, amplification, and animation.

Description. This first step requires participants to call to mind and reflect on a recent emotion-laden experience or image. This reflection necessitates that participants examine all aspects of this experience “through careful observation and description, including the context, feelings associated with the experience, actors involved, and relationships and interactions” (Dirkx, 2012, p. 124).

Association. Once participants have deeply reflected on an emotional-laden experience or image, they are now tasked with *associating* the artifact with other emotional-laden experiences or images from their histories which evoke similar emotions. For instance, a learner suggests that she grows frustrated that the professor misunderstands her viewpoint, even to the point of questioning her competence in front of other classmates. Upon reflecting deeper on this experience, she realizes that this episode has occurred in her past a number of times previously. She is able to describe these situations in depth link them together through the common feelings of shame and embarrassment.

Amplification. Reflection on prior emotion-laden experiences and images leads to the participant amplifying this reflective experience, connecting these experiences with cultural objects in order to make meaning of the original image (Dirkx, 2012, p. 125). Cultural objects include books, movies, music, and even mythology that reflect similar themes related to the original image. The student who felt shame and embarrassment at the hands of her professor would reflect on similar images in popular culture, leading her to realize she is “experiencing something that transcends her own individual experiences” (Dirkx, 2012, p. 125).

Animation. The final step in the imaginal process, and perhaps the most important, is *animating* the original emotion-laden experience or image - inviting the experience or image to come to life. At this juncture, the participant names and engages in dialogue with the original image. This practice leads the participant to deeper understandings of the meaning of the image

or experience, resulting in the potential for action. In our previous example, the student may understand that her feelings of shame and embarrassment stem from unconscious beliefs about her abilities due to the pain of previous experiences. Engaging the original experience leads her to a place of deeper self-understanding that could potentially result in renewed feelings of competence and confidence. Dirkx (2012) argues that “the student will experience new and deeper insights into the original experience, identifying and connecting with aspects of the self of which he or she was unaware” (p. 125).

Conclusion

Using the imaginal method, the participant expresses unconscious voices that are present within the educational process, the different parts of one’s self that are often present in emotion-laden experiences but that are seldom recognized or acknowledged. Beginning to recognize their presence and influence in our lives contributes to a greater self-understanding, thereby deepening our learning and cultivating a sense of wholeness. In other words, self-understanding is nurtured by creatively engaging, embracing, and working with emotions that may be evoked through the contexts, content, or process of adult learning. Entering into imaginative dialogues with these emotions and images contributes to processes of individuation of the learner’s psyche and recognition of the multiple selves that make up who we are.

Self-understanding, understood from this broader, more integrative perspective, represents an important dimension of the theory and practice of transformative learning. This study contributes to theorizing about the role that emotion-laden experiences and images contribute to meaning-making, transformative learning, and development of self-understanding in adult education. We see imaginative engagement as a creative, imaginative, and mythopoetic way of come to know self - other relationships that complements and contributes to the more rational and cognitive processes of critical self-reflection.

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